

Imamate and Epistemology in the thought of Sheikh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i - *'Abd al-Hakeem Carney*

The Double-Bind of the Occultation

More than anything else, the problem of Occultation has haunted Twelver Shi'a thinkers. On the one hand, one is faced with an enormous body of *hadeeth* that explicitly refer to the constant need for direct reference to the Imam,¹ alongside of complete prohibition of *ijtihad* and use of personal conjecture,² heavy criticism of the use of *kalam* and other methods of rational deducing both doctrines and law.³ Knowing and obeying one's Imam is elevated to the status of the most important pillar of Islam,⁴ with many narrations decrying those who reject their Imam as being nothing more than flotsam.⁵

In the current period, many intellectuals (especially in Iran) seem to be rebelling against this idea of Imamate, hoping for a Protestant-style "reformation" of Shi'ism where one's relationship with God is individual and unmediated. But once one removes the intermediary role of Imamate, it is difficult to see how Shi'ism retains much meaning as a doctrine, since Imamate stands at the core of its doctrine and could even be said to be the *raison d'être* of the sect's existence. An important question that must be confronted in the modern period, when Shi'ism is undergoing a dramatic re-thinking by *'ulama* and lay intellectuals who are dissatisfied with the disastrous state of the Islamic revolution in Iran,

1: *Al-Kafi*. Beirut: Dar as-Sa'ab and Dar at-Ta'arif, 1451 Hijri. vol. 1, pp. 168-174.

2: *Ibid.*, pp. 54-59.

3: *Ibid.*, pp. 92-94.

4: *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 18.

5: *Wasa'il as-Shi'a*. Qum: Mu'assah-e-Al-e-Bayt, 1412 Hijri. vol. 27, p. 68.

is how one can have any belief in Imamate while maintaining an individualized relationship with God.

This question inevitably leads to another discussion: Is it possible to have an individual relationship with the Imam during the period of *ghaybah*, or must all of one's religious life be channeled through the medium of the *fuqaha*? When thinkers in Iran discuss the idea of an Islamic reformation, they are not really rebelling against the idea of Imamate *per se*, but a conception of Imamate which has led to the justification of an oppressive theocracy that claims to represent the Imam. The real question, then, is whether or not one may have a personal experience and relationship with the Imam, whereby one receives the spiritual and esoteric illumination that the Imam is supposed to bring without the medium of a clergy.

Traditionally, the Shi'a *'ulama* had always taken a very forceful stance on the question of Imamate and the constant need for reference to the Imam. Sheikh al-Mufid (d. 413/1022), in his *Awai'l al-Maqalat*, seems to argue with some sense of pride that the Imamiyah are the only sect in Islam which believes in the constant necessity of Imamate, as opposed to the Mu'tazilah who would argue that although it is *wajib* (obligatory) it is possible for the Muslim world to default on this obligation.⁶ As a result it is no surprise that the Mu'tazilah would consistently take prominent Shi'a scholars like Sheikh al-Mufid to task on the issue of Occultation, demanding to know how all their emphasis on Imamate could be intelligible when believed one in the possibility of a prolonged Occultation.⁷

It is not hard to see why other sects, who might accept the

6: Sheikh al-Mufid. *Awai'l al-Maqalat*. Qum: Mihr, 1992. p.

7: See a discussion of Al-Mufid's debates with the Mu'tazilah on this issue in MacDermott, Martin J. *The Theology of Al-Shaikh al-Mufid*. Beirut: Dar el-Machreq éditeurs, 1978. pp. 122-123.

possibility of Occultation (as Jesus, Enoch, and Khidr are all said to be in a kind of Occultation) and a prolonged life for the Twelfth Imam (as Noah is described as lived nearly a millennium in the Qur'an), would not be able to see what is left of the concept of Imamate once the Imam was "ravished" for a long period of time, and why such enormous debates would ensue. This seemed to be a consistent subject of debate between scholars like Sheikh al-Mufid and their Mu'tazilah rivals in 4th-5th century Baghdad, and produced a variety of theological studies in defense of the *ghaybah*. Most prominent were the works of Sharif al-Murtada, who seems to be the first scholar to formulate a purely rational argument for Occultation based on the concept of *lutf* (grace).

This debate did not cease in Baghdad, but has gained more intensity through time. The most significant re-thinking on this issue, which has still yet to be accepted by the majority of 'ulama, was done by Imam Khomeini, argued in his *Misbah* that the just *faqih* (jurisprudent) who obtains a proper level of spiritual stature becomes the Perfect Man and "World-Pole" (*qutb*) of his time: "Anyone...who has the quality of Perfect Man.⁸...is a caliph in this world."⁹

It is not surprising that these ideas would come along and become accepted, at least for a time, by a large Shi'a population such as that in Iran. The popularity of Imam Khomeini during the

8: Here, Khomeini is making reference to the concept, made famous by Ibn 'Arabi, of *al-insan al-kamil*, the Perfect Man who combines in himself every virtue while being purified from every vice, and is the greatest manifestation of God in the cosmos. For a survey of these ideas in Ibn 'Arabi and other schools (such as the Brethren of Purity) see Takeshita, Masataka. *Ibn 'Arabi's Theory of the Perfect Man and its Place in the History of Islamic Thought*.

Tokyo: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1987.

9: Qtd. in Brumberg, Daniel: *Reinventing Khomeini*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001. p. 48.

80s was indicative of the yawning psychological need for the Imam to somehow manifest himself in order to lead a community¹⁰ that frequently feels itself victimized and attacked on all-sides.¹¹ More deeply, it indicates upon a general dissatisfaction with the type of rationalistic arguments that have been given to defend the idea of Occultation, such as those found in Al-Murtada's works.

The Biblical scholar Thomas McElwain once suggested to this author that the problem of the Occultation is, in many ways, similar to the question about the Ascension of Jesus in Christianity. On both cases, we have a central figure upon whom the entire edifice of religion is built departing from direct contact with the faithful. Faithfulness to this figure is of the most important soteriological concern, for salvation does not lie merely in orthodoxy or orthopraxy, but in a firm, dedicated commitment to a specific person, a commitment that must be based on *love* more than anything else. This is why Shi'ism has never accepted that a mere acceptance of the Imam's authority is sufficient for one to be on the right path; rather, one must love the Imam more than one's own self.

On one level, the question about Jesus' Ascension as a departure from the world does not pose the same dilemmas as the Occultation of the Imam. On the one hand, the Divinity of Jesus helps to make the question of his physical, human presence relatively unimportant. If Jesus is by his very person God, then the omnipresence of God ensures that the Divine Person of Jesus remains present in one form or another. The fact that the Twelver Shi'as are emphatic that the Imam is not God, but rather a "means of

10: Linda Walbridge explores the sociology of this phenomena in her *Without Forgetting the Imam*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1996.

11: Moojan Momen claims that this siege-mentality which has become one of the most important part of the Twelver Shi'a cultural *milieu*. See Momen, Moojan. *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

approach”¹² to God, makes the issue more cloudy. For the belief that God requires a means of approach would imply that God remains wholly distant if that means of approach was closed. Without the Imam (or prophet, at earlier times in history), the Divine-human communication would be cut off. There seems to be, then, a problem of two *ghaybas*: one is the Divine *ghaybah*, the distance of God from the Earth. This *ghaybah* is solved by the presence of Prophet’s and Imams. This is referred to in a *hadeeth* of Al-Kafi discussing the need for Divine “proofs” (Prophets and Imams):

Indeed, he who knows that he has a Lord should know that this Lord is pleased with certain things and angered by other things. This person should also be aware that he cannot know what pleased or angers his Lord except through revelation (*wahy*) or a Messenger (*rasul*). He who does not receive revelation, then, must seek out a Messenger.¹³

The second *ghaybah* is the *ghaybah* of the Imam himself. Unfortunately, no real solutions for this second *ghaybah* have been offered by the traditional Shi’a *‘ulama*. On matters of law, the *‘ulama* have traditionally granted themselves the position of explicating that law during the *ghaybah*; but while the Shi’a *‘ulama* have been fairly successful in creating an ecclesiastical mechanism for dealing with the day-to-day legal needs of the community, no ways have been offered for organizing the spiritual life of the community or giving people a way to take the spiritual benefit that the Imam is supposed to bring. This is not due as much to a lapse on the part of the clergy as it is a fear of arrogating too much power in the hands of a clergyman.

Still, it is not hard to see how any believer would refuse to

12: Generally, the idea of the Imam as *waseelah* has been based on the Shi’a interpretation of the *ayat* of Qur’an: “Seek a means of approach to Allah.”

13: *Al-Kafi*, vol. 1, p. 169.

accept that the means of approach are entirely closed during the Occultation. The question then remains: How does that means of approach function during the *ghaybah*? The Shi'a *fuqaha*'s refusal to make any realm claims for claims for spiritual or mystical authority has left this question open. Of course, this double-bind created by the belief in a God who is not perceptible to sense-perception (and therefore Occulted in one sense), and the Occultation of the Imam that should remedy that distance, is not isolated to Shi'ism. It was an issue of profound importance to that body of sects which have been broadly labeled as gnostic, and the way the idea of the Living Jesus was exemplified in many gnostic works (and in the Gospel of Thomas) have been an attempt to resolve that paradox.

Some, such as Henry Corbin and Mohammad Ali Amier-Moezzi, have argued that one of the inevitable implications of the Occultation is the "individualization" of Islam and Shi'ism. Indeed, some researchers such as Momen have argued that this individualism was one of the defining features of the Shi'a religion until the time of Imam Khomeini.¹⁴

This attitude is already manifested inside Islamic law itself, where we find that those aspects of *fiqh* which are related to social matters have generally been held to be suspended (or at least no longer obligatory) during the *ghaybah*, and in some cases even prohibited. These include three very important aspects: *jihad*, the imposition of legal penalties, and Friday prayers.¹⁵ Generally, the consensus on the issue of Friday prayers has been that they cease to be obligatory during the time of *ghaybah*, though some early scholars argued that it is wholly impermissible.¹⁶ Almost all Shi'a *fuqaha*

14: Momen, Ibid. pp. 297-299.

15: Amir-Moezzi, Mohammad Ali. *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*. Tr. By David Streight. Albany: SUNY, 1994. p. 134.

16: For a brief survey of these positions in a standard Shi'ite seminary text, see Maghniyah, Muhammad Jawad. *Fiqh al-Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq*. Qum: Ansariyan Publications, 1999. vol. 1, pp. 275-276.

have been of the opinion that offensive *jihad* is impermissible during the *ghaybah*,¹⁷ including Imam Khomeini himself. Only recently some scholars such as Ayatullah Fadlullah and Ayatullah Kazim Hairi have argued that such *jihad* is permissible provided it is led by the *wilayat-e-faqih*.¹⁸ The fact that, even after many centuries, the Shi'a *'ulama* have been reticent about allowing a purely offensive *jihad* is indicative of a kind of collective fear of going too far and arrogating too many rights from the Imam, a fear manifested by the widespread resistance to Imam Khomeini's reforms found amongst senior Shi'a clergy.¹⁹

In the current period, we find many Shi'a intellectuals in Iran returning to theme of an individualized Shi'ism, with thinkers like 'Abd al-Kareem Soroush arguing for a secularism whose goal is to *preserve* the integrity of religion by freeing it from the corrupting influences of power and politics.²⁰ Iranian academic Hasan Aghajari was recently sentenced to death for advocating just such an Islamic Protestantism, calling out for a religious revival that would rescue (in his words) Islam from a clergy he views as corrupt, authoritarian, and backwards.²¹ Mojtabeh Shabestari has been particularly emphatic about the need for a purely personal relationship with God, one where God is known through individual experience without the need for a clergy, and one which cannot be based upon purely exoteric disciplines such as law and logic.²² Henry Corbin, however, seems to have presaged these

17: Ibid., vol. 2, pp. 253-255.

18: Hairi, Sayyid Kazim. *Wilayat al-Amr fi 'Asr al-Ghaybah*. Qum: Majma' Al-Fikr al-Islami, 1414 Hijri. pp. 67-72.

19: Keddie, Nikki. *Roots of Revolution*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981. p. 263

20: See Brumberg, Ibid., p. 206.

21: A large part of Aghajari's speech can be found translated into in English in the article "In Iran, a Drive for Islamic Reformation." *New York Times* Dec. 5, 2002.

22: Brumberg, Ibid., p. 214.

contemporary Iranian reformers, arguing that the *ghaybah* creates a mode in history similar to the kind of Islamic secularism Soroush and others refer to:

The idea of the occultation of the Imam forbids all socialization of the spiritual, all materialization of the spiritual hierarchies and forms which would identify these with the constituted bodies of the external, visible history; this idea is only compatible with the structure of a spiritual sodality, a pure *ecclesia spiritualis*.²³

The Imam of the present-time does not have the political or dogmatic role which his predecessors held, as he is ruler over no one, and he is unable to teach. Does this mean that the Imam has no role, and is completely valueless during a state of *ghaybah*? If there is such a thing as an *ecclesia spiritualis* led by the Imam, this would demand that there be more to his role than merely exoteric, political leadership, and that he must have a spiritual presence which functions during the *ghaybah*.

The Qur'an itself describes the Prophet as being the one who purifies the believers by giving them knowledge and wisdom,²⁴ and so one could easily say that if the Imam is the inheritor of the Prophet (as Twelver Shi'ism is emphatic about), then the Imam must have a somewhat similar role in purifying those who seek spiritual advancement whether he is physically present or not.

Most scholars in the Twelver tradition, however, have not sought to deal with this issue, and have instead made elaborate attempts to justify the idea of Imamate based on a purely exoteric understanding of that office. Some scholars, such as Sharif al-Murtada, have attempted to salvage the position of the Imam during this period through a theological argument, based on the concept

23: Qtd. in Arjomand, *The Shadow of God*, p. 163.

24: 62:2.

of Divine Grace (*lutf*).²⁵ Arguing that *taklif* (the imposition of legal commands), which is itself a kind of Divine Grace (allowing people to achieve closeness to God through the fulfillment of legal obligations and the performance of good deeds), God must grace the people with someone who represents what he wants.²⁶ That Grace, argues Murtada, is fulfilled once that person comes into place, and if that person is hidden (but still existent), then that grace is still existent as well.²⁷ He argues, as did Sheikh al-Mufid,²⁸ that if anybody *really* needs the Imam to settle some sort of legal question that he will come out of his Occultation and make his opinion known. Otherwise, the issue must be something that is left up to reason.

Finally, in terms of the Imam's relationship to the community, Murtada argues that the collective awareness that the Imam is still physically present (albeit hidden from view) and may re-appear at anytime will inspire the community to be better Muslims, and as a result good deeds will increase.²⁹

This formulation, which has become popular amongst the Shi'a theologians, does not really answer the question. On the one hand, if the Imam can be gone for centuries and centuries, than it would seem that the *lutf* Murtada was speaking about was never really needed to begin with. Secondly, the bulk of *hadeeth* literature says that the time of Occultation is one of confusion and strife, where most believers will become apostates. The argument that belief and good deeds will increase during the *ghaybah* stands in stark opposition to the profoundly Messianic understanding of

25: For a valuable discussion on Al-Murtada's conception of *taklif* and the grace (*lutf*) of Imamate, see Sachedina, Abdulaziz. *Islamic Messianism*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1981. pp. 112-134.

26: Murtada, Ash-Sharif. *Rasa'il*, p. 310.

27: Ibid., *Rasa'il*, p. 311.

28: MacDermott, *The Theology of Al-Shaikh al-Mufid*, p. 295-297.

29: Cf. Sachedina, Ibid., , p. 134.

the Twelfth Imam, who will re-appear at the end of a period of chaos in order to finally set the world right.

The question about the possibility for an independent, spiritual relationship with the Imam is one that Moezzi broaches in his *Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*. He has argued that the attempt to turn Shi'ism into a political *ideology*, combined with the institutionalization of a clergy based on *taqlid*, has marginalized those who would seek an individual relationship with God brought about by an individual relationship with the Imam.³⁰ It would seem that the only traditionally oriented scholar who attempted to understand how one can have such an individual relationship with the Imam was Sheikh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i, who sought to build a mystical understanding of Imamate on the edifice of Shi'ism's exoteric aspects. He never sought to deny the kind of magisterial Imamate which Corbin refers to critically, but rather seeks to integrate it into a complete understanding of spiritual guidance and the means for salvation. In the debate about how an individualized Shi'ism can function alongside the office of Imamate, Sheikh Ahmad's works are of critical importance.

Sheikh Ahmad Al-Ahsa'i (d. 1824) was perhaps the only Shi'ite *'alim* to take up the issues we have presented so far and attempted to synthesize them into a complete system. There have, of course, been a number of famous scholars who have attempted to take the mystical implications of Imamate and develop a school of philosophy around it, Mulla Sadra and Faiz Kashani being the most famous names in that field. But the attempt to combine a mystical, "inspiration" based system of thought with the traditional dictates of jurisprudence, i.e., to combine the exoteric and dogmatic aspects of Imamate (what Corbin calls the "magisterial" or

30: Moezzi, Ibid. p. 139.

“pontifical” Imamate)³¹ with its esoteric counterpart, was unheard of until Sheikh Ahmad began to develop a wholly new understanding of religious authority in Shi’ism. The dominant feature of his thinking was the attempt to add, alongside of *naql* and *‘aql* (in the sense of reason), a third method by which a Shi’ite scholar would receive enlightenment: *kashf*, or unveiling, that allowed for the possibility of a kind of *ilham* (inspiration) by which a scholar would receive religious knowledge.

Nonetheless, this kind of “unveiling” was directly linked to the Imam, and the Imam remains *the* pivotal center of his entire mystical cosmology. As such, he maintains a unique balance between the kind of magisterial Imamate elaborated by early scholars, and the kind of independent mysticism which has been referred to in Moezzi’s study.³²

Sheikh Ahmad was originally a native of Eastern Arabia, and an accomplished scholar in the traditional Islamic sciences. The bulk of his work was written at the beginning of the nineteenth-century, a time when the hierocratic authority of the *usuli* school of thought was nearing its triumph over its *akhbhari* rivals, as well as its Sufi opponents in the form of the Ni’matullahi order. The rising power and prominence of the *usuli mujtahids* brought to light the long simmering tension within Shi’ite doctrine itself, discussed above: What is the real relationship of the believer to his Imam, and how is this relationship to exist during the time of the Occultation? If the *‘ulama* (in the broadest meaning of that term, not necessarily confined to the traditional *fuqahah*) are in some way the inheritors or representatives of the Imam’s authority, then what kind of body does the *‘ulama* constitute? It was on this level that he borrowed from the Illuminations of Suhrawardi to make

31: Corbin, Henry. *Alone with the Alone*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997. p. 83.

32: Moezzi, Ibid. pp. 6-13.

kashf, unveiling which leads to spiritual inspiration, a central part of his doctrine.

In many ways, Sheikh Ahmad's system is largely based on the cosmological themes found in Ibn 'Arabi. His commentary on the *hadeeth* which details the "creation" of the various Names of Allah reads almost identically to Ibn 'Arabi's own writings on the primordial creation of Allah, and he uses the same concepts of the "primordial cloud" (*al-'ama al-awal*) and the "merciful breath" (*an-nufus ar-rahmani*)³³ which can be found in Ibn 'Arabi's *Futuh al-Makkiyah*. Yet while he may be willing to accept a large part of the cosmology of Ibn 'Arabi, he is absolutely unwilling to accept Ibn 'Arabi's doctrines with relationship to the Perfect Man (*al-insan al-kamil*) and the *qutb* (Pole, the one who is the center of the cosmos). Ibn 'Arabi conceptualized this office as being something which can be earned by individuals who are triumphant in the cause of spiritual perfection. Such an idea stands in complete contradiction to the Shi'a idea of Imamate, and to the adamant belief that the Imam is someone who is appointed by *nass* (designation) by Allah Himself. The Imam is the center of Sheikh Ahmad's thinking, and the center of any attempt to reach Allah. He closely follows those narrations found in *Al-Kafi* which attribute an enormous cosmological function to the Imams. They are both the cause (or purpose) of Creation, and the means by which it may return to the Creator. To abandon them is to abandon all of religion itself, and as such Sheikh Ahmad has very little patience for Ibn 'Arabi's Sunnism.

The incredible emphasis given to the Imams in Sheikh Ahmad's writings and thought is indicative of his relationship to the idea of the magisterial (the dogmatic, exoteric) Imamate. He does not, in any way, accept that spiritual progress or understanding can be

33: Al-Ahsa'i, Sheikh Ahmad. *Rasa'il Al-Hikmah*. Beirut: Dar al-'Alamiyyah, 1993. pp. 7-15.

achieved without the Imam, nor will he tolerate any difference of opinion or conflict with the words and teachings of the Imams. But accepting the privileged status of the Imams as the unique means of approach (*waseelah*) to Allah, he then sought to transcend this definition and bring it into a spiritual sphere. There, the Imam ceases to be a mere explicator of law, though the legal capacity of the Imam is very important in Sheikh Ahmad's theology, and instead becomes the source of illumination (*ishraq*), through which spiritual elite achieve nearness to Allah. The Imams become esoteric guides, whose function is *not* limited to the times of their physical presence. He is adamant to assert the continued centrality of the Imam even during the *ghaybah*, and though he accepts the *taklif*-oriented arguments of Sharif al-Murtada, he attempts to deepen this understanding by presenting a methodology where the Light of the Imam operates during the period of Occultation. In this way the magisterial and esoteric Imamate are both entirely preserved in his writings.

The Spiritual Authority of Imamate

Before embarking on a study of how Sheikh Ahmad's works present the possibility for an individual relationship with the Imam, we must understand the importance which Sheikh Ahmad gives to the Imam in his thinking. We must remember that if we speak about Sheikh Ahmad opening the way for a personal spirituality, he is not referring to an entirely unmediated relationship with God. The Imam always remains the medium, but what he creates the space for is a personal relationship with that medium that does not require clergy or Sufi *tariqat*. The inspired knowledge which Sheikh Ahmad argues comes as the result of *kashf* was not a direct kind of inspiration from Allah, in the way that Ibn 'Arabi understood his self-proclaimed position as the Seal of the Muhammad

saints, but rather comes through the medium of the Imam as God's primary manifestation.

The centrality of the Imam in Sheikh Ahmad's thinking, the same centrality which makes it impossible for their to be saints that operate independently of the true *qutb* (the Imam), is also what makes it impossible for Imamate to be earned. In this way he takes Ibn 'Arabi to task for his doctrine of the Perfect Man, a position which (like Imam Khomeini later) Ibn 'Arabi argued could be earned and reached by a proper believer. But this is impossible for Sheikh Ahmad, as Imamate is not something which exists merely in the temporal world (*al-'alam az-zamani*), on the plane of "actual" history. It has a cosmic existence in the non-temporal world, (*al-'alam ad-dahr*), a world which is not entirely distinguished from this level of existence, but exists in a kind of sympathy with it. Sheikh Ahmad is careful to distinguish the position of the Ahl al-Bayt with regards to these two levels, and he presents this distinction as part of his discourse on the nature of Allah's Mercy (*rahmah*) and the means by which that Mercy enters into the world. The office of Imamate is something eternal, something was decided upon before creation, and for this reason it is the mediating reality between God and man.

This understanding of Imamate is apparent in the Sheikh's to Mirza Ja'far An-Nuwab, where he attempts to explain the meaning of the ritual *salawat* (blessing) done on the Prophet and his family: "O Allah send blessings upon the Prophet and his family as you blessed Abraham and his family." Commensurate with Sheikh Ahmad's constant attempt to observe both the interior and esoteric meanings of Islam, he first presents a quite standard, linguistic meaning of this *salawat*, namely that it is a request to Allah to give His Mercy to the Ahl al-Bayt. But the actual meaning, he says, is based upon the mechanism by which Allah's Mercy went to the family of Abraham, and the *salawat* consists of a kind of

cosmic “reciprocation.” Elsewhere he states that such a *salawat* is necessary insofar as it is inconceivable to demand the intercession and aid of the Ahl al-Bayt without offering something in return.³⁴

The Prophet’s family was the first manifestation of the Mercy of Allah, and act as a “container” for all of the Mercy of Allah. Because they are the first creation, they are the first to be embodied with the general Mercy (*ar-rahmah al-‘ammah*) which is given to all created beings. Because they are the first “step” which Mercy traverses, nothing is embraced by the Divine Mercy except by and through them:

Know that Allah, may He be Glorified, made Muhammad and his family the vessel of His Mercy in the World of Secrets before he created Creation. As such, nothing from His Mercy reaches anything in Creation because it is the right of anything in Creation, or because of any innate goodness of those Created things, or because of any prayer on the part of anything else in Creation. Rather, the Mercy only connects [to Creation] because of the goodness which is connected to them and for which they are a medium.³⁵

Sheikh Ahmad makes continual emphasis to this “primordial” Imamate whose primary role is cosmogenic. In a later letter, he discusses the chronology of creation that is referred to in Al-Kafi, namely that the first thing created before all else was the light of the Prophet, and from his light was created the light of his family, in light with the *hadeeth* of Imam Ali: “I am to Muhammad as a light from a light.” Once the Fourteen Infallibles were created, they set out to worship Allah and sing His Glories for a period of a thousand “eons,” each eons then defined as being 100,000 years. Allah then looked at the light of the Fourteen Infallibles and saw that it consisted of 124,000 segments (or drops), and so then created each of the 124,000 prophets from

34: Al-Ahsa’i, Ibid., pp. 270-271.

35: Al-Ahsa’i, Ibid., p. 32.

these drops of light. Finally, from the “radiance” of this light was created the light of the believers.³⁶ This cosmology establishes an intimate link between those who would become believers in this life and the Fourteen Infallibles, for the soul of every true believer (regardless of which prophet they followed) was “born” from the light of Prophet Muhammad and his family.

The pre-cosmic reality of the Ahl al-Bayt necessitates the impossibility of him accepting both theses of Ibn ‘Arabi related to the *qutb*: the possibility of earning such a position, and the possibility of their being spiritual seekers who are not in need of his guidance and instruction. On this level, nothing is blessed as a result of its innate goodness. First comes the Prophet and his family, and they are then made a kind of path (*sabeel*) to the Mercy of Allah. They, and they alone, are the mechanism by which the creative Mercy enters into the universe, and as a result it is only through them that the rest of Creation comes into being. The office of *qutb* cannot be earned because it was already “assigned” long before this world came into being, and was the *waseelah* (medium) by which the rest of the world came into being.

As is almost always the case, Sheikh Ahmad is not straying far from the letter of many *hadeeths*. The entire concept of *tawasul*, the act of seeking intercession from the Prophet and his family, is based upon the notions discussed above. In a number of sources *tawasul*, whereby one requests something from Allah based upon the right (*haqq*) of the Prophet and his family, is said to be the *du’a* which rescued Abraham from the fire of Nimrod and rescued Jesus from those who were attempting to crucify him.³⁷ Asking Allah by the name of the Prophet is considered to be the best way to open up His Mercy, as they are the embodiments and the vessel of that Mercy from eternity.

36: Ibid., p. 257.

37: See *Wasa’il*, vol.

All of this is from the standpoint of the “hidden world” which exists in eternity. But if we look to the external world which exists in time, we find the same principle operating:

As far as the manifest world, then insofar as Abraham and his family existed before the Prophet and his family, so then Allah has blessed Abraham and his family as a result of their goodness and the fact that they deserve such blessing, and also because of the prayers of angels, men, *jinn*s and others, and so he therefore blesses them from the goodness of His Mercy, but nonetheless the coming of this mercy is still through the medium of the Prophet and His Family.

The formula of the *salawat* given above acts as a reciprocation of the Mercy which has already spread from Allah, through the Prophet and his family (in their cosmogenic role), to the rest of creation. It is an attempt to “close the circle.” For it is obvious that the function of the Ahl al-Bayt is not merely creative; the obvious, exterior function in all Shi’ite sects is guidance. As such they are the cause of the universe’s coming into being *and* the cause of its return to its creator, and are therefore the possessors of both the general mercy (*ar-rahma al-‘ammah*), which is the existentiating mercy given to all things, and the special mercy (*ar-rahma al-khassah*) which is particular to the believers and seeks to draw the purified closer to Allah. He writes later that: “Nothing, in all of creation, passes from the cosmos to Allah except by their medium.”³⁸

The understanding Sheikh Ahmad derives from the *salawat* is based on the acknowledgement of the Ahl al-Bayt’s position in this regard, and the call for blessings to be sent down to the Prophet and his family is an attempt to shift the path of that Mercy back through its original channel. He sums this up in his own reformulation of the *salawat*, expressing the “interior” meaning of this prayer:

38: Al-Ahsa’i, *Ibid.*, p. 33.

“O Allah, send blessings upon Muhammad and the family of Muhammad, whom You have made the vessel of Your *salawat*, Mercy and Blessing, and have made to be the path towards your bounty to all of Your Creation, who themselves are blessed by the goodness which You have given them and joined to them by Your Mercy, a goodness which you passed on to Abraham and his family, those whose names are praised in all the universe. So as You blessed Abraham and his family until You made them sincere *shi’a* [partisans] of Muhammad and his pure family, and made them Imams because of their sincere devotion, and gave them religion and guided them to the straight path, so bless Muhammad and the family of Muhammad whom You have made the well-spring of Your Mercy, the treasure of Your Blessing, and Your Path to the Your Servants, those through whom You blessed Abraham and his family, glorified their position amongst Your Servants, and exalted them in Your Lands, all through Muhammad and his family.”³⁹

There is no doubt that the works of Ibn ‘Arabi and the Shi’a philosophers of the Isfahan school influenced Sheikh Ahmad’s attempt to re-assert the cosmic significance of the Imam. Nonetheless, it is not proper to say that Sheikh Ahmad merely “borrowed” the system of Ibn ‘Arabi and corrected those points which would contradict Shi’a doctrine, thereby sanitizing of its Sunnism and making it acceptable to those who championed the *wilayat* of Imam Ali above all else. For the concepts which Sheikh Ahmad referred to are embedded in the earliest Shi’a works. It is not only in *Al-Kafi* that such concepts can be found; the pre-*ghaybah* text of *Kitab al-Mahasin* also details these same ideas, in spite of the fact that it is primarily a work on ethics above all else. Instead, it seems that the system of Ibn ‘Arabi gave Sheikh Ahmad a framework with which to approach these narrations, narrations which were mostly ignored by the *fuqaha* and the scholars of *kalam*.

39: Ibid, p. 32-33.

We can also see part of the reason why Imamate place such a critical role in the Sheikh's thinking if we analyze the way he follows a number of the Neoplatonic themes related to the primordial nature of *'aql*, coming to similar conclusions as many Ismaili philosophers. On this level his writing becomes quite gnostic (in the sense of the Christian gnosticism of Valentinus and others, not general mysticism). In his commentary on the *hadeeth* about the creation of the names, already referred to above, we find Sheikh Ahmad following a long tradition of mystical writing on the ultimate origins of the universe. The text of the *hadeeth* under discussion, found in *Al-Kafi*, is as follows:

Indeed, Allah the Blessed and Glorified created a Name, formed of letters unpronounced, words unspoken, a person without form, and a vague form (*tashbih*) without color or dye. This Name was denied space or limit, and it was veiled from the senses of any who would seek to imagine it, hidden without having been hidden. Allah made it a complete word, situated on four parts together, not one part preceding any other. He manifested from it three names, three names which Creation would be dependent upon, while one of these names remained hidden and protected. These three names which were manifested, they were manifested as *Allah*, *The Blessed*, *The Exalted*. Then, He (glory be to Him) subordinated to each one of these names four pillars, making twelve pillars in all. For each pillar he created 30 names which related to it in actuality, and these names were: The Merciful, the Mercy-Giving, the King, the Former, the Eternally Living Who takes no rest or sleep, the Knowledgeable, the Aware, the Hearing, the Seeing, the Wise, the Mighty, the Impeller, the Proud, the High, the Most Glorious, the Dominant one Who gives order, the Source of Peace, the Source of Security, the Sovereign, the Grower, the Originator, the Sublime, the Glorious, the Noble, the Sustainer, the Life-Giver, the Life-Taker, the Raiser, and the Inheritor. All the Names from

the Most Beautiful Names, and there are 360 of these, are related to the [original] three [manifested] Names and their pillars. And He has hidden the Unique, Hidden, Protected Name by means of these three names, and to this end He has said: "Say: Call upon Allah or call upon the Merciful. Whatever you call Him by, to Him are the most Beautiful Names."⁴⁰

The gnostic nature of this *hadeeth* is clear. Allah is described as having made Himself known by creating an initial manifestation from an original, "complete" Name which remains absolutely indescribable. Sheikh Ahmad describes this name as being that which encompasses all the levels of existence. It is the "greatest name" (*al-ism al-akbar*), which cannot be considered to be an actual phrase (*lafz*) of any kind, and as such cannot be depicted by any alphabet.⁴¹ This name is said to rest upon four "parts" which, according to Sheikh Ahmad, consist of: the Will, the Universal Intellect (*al-'aql al-kull*), the Universal Soul (*al-nafs al-kull*), and the Universal Body (*al-jism al-kull*).⁴²

From these four parts there comes four Names, with three of these Names manifest and one hidden. The three manifest names are *Allah*, *the Blessed*, and *the Exalted*. Because these are three manifest names, this means that they are neither identified with the fourth, hidden name, nor with the original name from which "sits" upon these four parts. In line with this four-fold taxonomy, Shaikh Al-Ahsa'i goes on to follow the Ismaili followers in interpreting the true referent for the name Allah:

The attribute of the Noble Name, which is Allah, is a referent to the First Intelligence (*al-'aql al-awwal*). This Name cannot be a reference to the [original, primordial name in the series], because that Name is made up of letters which are not vocalized, whereas

40: *Al-Kafi*, vol. 1, p. 113, *hadeeth* #1.

41: Al-Ahsa'i, *Ibid.*, p. 18.

42: Al-Ahsa'i, *Ibid.*, p. 19.

this Name [Allah] is vocalized by letters, and expressed in speech. Nor can the meaning be the Essence of Allah which is described by Divinity, but rather refers to the place of His Manifestation [*mazhar*], which is the *ʿaql*. This is something He refers to when He, may He be Glorified, says: “Allah is the Light of the Heavens and Earth...”⁴³

The name “Allah,” then, is what is manifested by this original *ʿaql* which comes about after the original, primordial Will which brought the cosmos into being - the original, primordial Name of God remains forever hidden. The *ʿaql* is not the first epiphany in this context; for the first epiphany is, properly, the level of the Will, which Sheikh Ahmad also describes (using Ibn ‘Arabi’s terms) as *the primordial Cloud*. But the Cloud is precisely what its name implies: a nebulous, unshaped form which embodies all the forms of the cosmos, but has yet to undergo any kind of separation or specification which would open the way for the concrete shape of those things which would later exist in the cosmos. The *ʿaql*, then, is the first “determination” (*ta’yun al-ʿawwal*) which comes about inside this cloud, from which other determinations and specifications appear, eventually progressing to lower levels of existence until our own crude, physical world.⁴⁴ In this way the *ʿaql* becomes the first actual place of manifestation, for in its existence as a specified and determined being it acts as a proper epiphany form of which the Cloud is only a preliminary, a nebulous vapor of existence which cannot be called a “creation” as such.

The fact that the name “Allah” refers to this first individuation, rather than to the Godhead itself, leads Sheikh Ahmad in another discussion to refer to Allah as *the complete unknown* (*al-majhul al-mutlaq*). This leads to a later discussion whereby the Imam becomes the only way of making contact with this complete

43: Al-Ahsa’i, *Ibid.*, p. 20.

44: Corbin, *Alone with the Alone*, pp. 187-189.

unknown, the only way that God becomes known, giving new meaning to the idea of *waseelah* (mediation). It is also important to realize that, in the *hadeeth*, the office of the Imam is linked with the idea of this primordial Universal Intellect, of which the Imam becomes the manifestation in this world. This is alluded to in an important *hadeeth* in *Al-Kafi*, where Imam Musa ibn Ja'far says: "Indeed, Allah has two proofs (*hujjat*, the word often used for the Imam) over mankind, an exterior proof and an interior proof. The exterior proof is the Prophets, Messengers, and Imams, peace be upon them. And the interior proof are the Intelligences."⁴⁵

In the same fashion as gnostic Christianity and many strands of Ismailism, the Godhead itself is, by definition, entirely unknowable. For the Godhead is that level of existence which was eternal, before God sought to make Himself Manifest. Once He Manifested Himself, he hid Himself, in a same way that the light of the sun, while making it visible, also renders it impossible to see the actual physical form of the sun behind that light. In a letter entitled "A Response to a Number of Gnostics [*'urafah*]", he seeks to answer the following question: When a person is in the ritual *salat*, and is reciting the verse of *fatihah* where one says: "You alone do we worship, and You alone do we serve," what should be the intention of the person in reciting this? Should they be intending to speak towards the Essence which cannot, actually, ever be reached, or should they be seeking something else?⁴⁶

Sheikh Ahmad begins his discussion with a re-assertion of the absolute impossibility of knowing Allah in His Essence, a consistent theme as part of his general attempt to refute those Sufis who claim annihilation (*fana'*) and union with the Essence of Allah. Rather, he says (mirroring Ibn 'Arabi's discussion on this subject), Allah is only known in the way that He makes Himself known

45: *Al-Kafi*, vol. 1, p. 19.

46: Al-Ahsa'i, *Rasa'il Al-Hikmah*, p. 60.

to individual creatures *through* those same creatures.⁴⁷ However, even though everything may act as a locus of manifestation for Allah, at the same time such things act as a veil upon Him. They both reveal Him, and clothe Him. It is for this reason that reaching the Essence is impossible, for everything which makes Him Known also makes Him Unknown. This is an important theme in Ibn 'Arabi's discussion on veils, which always paradoxically serve as loci for the Divine manifestation.⁴⁸

This applies, perhaps most especially, in the situation of direct address to Allah which occurs in that part of the *fatihah* quoted above. He embarks upon a discussion of semiotics and the nature of signs with this regard: Whenever someone addresses somebody else, they are only "reaching" that person from the standpoint of however that person has been called. If somebody says: "Hey you sitting there," then the person is being called to is only reached to by virtue of the attribute *sitting*. In direct address, even when the person is being addressed by the very direct pronoun "You," the situation remains the same:

When you say "You alone do we worship," you have made the intention to refer to the one being addressed. But the one who is addressing is actually limiting (or condition, *qayyid*) the one being addressed, and the one being addressed is not reached except from the standpoint of the one who is addressing him.⁴⁹

Based on the gap between the signifier, the sign, and the signified, there is an impossibility of reaching the Essence of Allah. He is, then, the complete unknown. This is because anything which makes Allah known, any attribute or description, is also something other than Him, and as a result hides Him beneath that description or attribute. The Essence is always that which remains

47: Ibid.

48:

49: Al-Ahsa'i, Ibid., p. 61.

un-manifest because that is its essential definition; it is the eternal “substance” which remains the same and subsists amidst the semiotic “betrayal” of the signs (even when these signs are created entities as opposed to mere linguistic forms) which seek to name Him.

The impossibility of reaching Allah in His Essence, then, requires a *medium*, and the medium for Allah’s Mercy has already been described as being the luminary, eternal souls of the Ahl al-Bayt. This medium does not lead one to the Essence; it is rather a *barzakh* where the Divine can meet the human in an area of cosmic overlap. In his treatise on the *hadeeth* of the creation of the Names, Sheikh Ahmad describes each one of the “four parts” with many names. The first is described as being the Will, the Primordial Cloud, but also (as Ibn ‘Arabi also described it) as being *the Merciful Breath (an-nufus ar-rahmani)*. This Breath was the first epiphany of Divine Mercy, the Mercy of which the Ahl al-Bayt become the “vessel” or “receptacle.” When the reality of the Imams is identified with that of the original or universal Intelligence, the need for Imamate becomes clear: For the figure of the Imam is as far as the spiritual seeker may go. He is the ultimate manifestation and sign of Allah, and in fact is the only way that He was ever manifest to begin with. Without the Imam, all that remains is the Essence, a reality which remains eternally hidden, and can only be called “the complete unknown.” The Imam, then, is as far as the believer can “see” Allah, because he is the one who makes the Imam seen. This is referred to in the *hadeeth* of *Al-Kafi* where Imam as-Sadiq says: “Without us, Allah would not be worshipped.”⁵⁰

The role of the Imam as a *barzakh*, as an area of overlap between the Divine and the human, is made explicit in a treatise where Sheikh Ahmad describes the Imams and Prophets as a “translator”

50:

(*tarjuman*). On the one hand, the “translator” stands upon the highest level, with relationship to the Law and the obligation of the law (*taklif*) upon the people. At the same time he stands on the lowest level, in order that he can spread the message (*tabligh*) and make people understand it (*ta’reef*).⁵¹ This role of mediation, however, also makes the Godhead entirely unknowable. For a translator, in actual life, is the farthest a person can “reach” the words of the person who is being translated for. The translator is both the source of making a foreigner’s words comprehensible, but also veils those persons actually words by standing in their place, and by the translator becoming the tongue for the other person.

Sheikh Ahmad does not make specific mention of the Imam in his commentary on the *hadeeth* of the Creation of the Names. But the role of the Imam as the first determination within the Primordial Cloud is referred to in other treatises. Like many mystics, Sheikh Ahmad makes wide of letter-based symbolism.⁵² The Universal Soul, which emanates from the Universal Intellect, is described as being in the shape of the letter *ba* (the Arabic letter for B). This letter is in the form of a horizontal line with the ends stretched up, and a dot underneath: ب. Four other letters share this shape, which are differentiated from each other by the number and arrangement of its dots. In a famous *hadeeth* of Imam Ali, he is quoted as having said: “I am the dot under the *ba*,” i.e., that he is that first “dot” which differentiates one letter from another. Though the *ba* can be said to be derived from the *alif* (because the *alif*, written as ا, is a straight line and is therefore the basis by which all other letters are formed), the *dot* is something new which leads to differentiation inside the alphabet. While the Primordial Cloud

51: Al-Ahsa’i, *Ibid.*, p. 201.

52: For a good discussion of Sheikh Ahmad’s use of letter-mysticism, and the general use of such a schema in other mystical systems such as the Kabbalah, see Cole, Juan R. I. “The World as Text: Cosmologies of Shaykh Ahmad al-Al-Ahsa’i.” *Studia Islamica* 80 (1994): 1-23.

remains the first true epiphany of the Divine Being, its form is entirely indeterminate, and, therefore cannot serve as a locus of manifestation to the rest of the creatures. It is, rather, the locus of the locus of manifestation. It requires determination and individuation, and this *hadeeth* of Imam Ali refers to him being that being which gives determinate form to the nebulous Cloud.⁵³

Such a position is clearly something that cannot be earned, as Ibn 'Arabi would argue for his concept of the *qutb*, for the reality of the Imamate is something that descended downward from the Divine reality before any created beings came into existence. Before any concept of earning the favour of Allah can be conceived, this initial act of determination (*ta'iyyun*) must have occurred. Such is the impossibility of having a *qutb* who is not appointed by *nass*. The Imam, then, becomes that area of *barzakh* where Divine may communicate with the human. Without the mediation of the Ahl al-Bayt, who were the first determinations inside the Primordial Cloud, the ability of the Divine Mercy to reach the cosmos (and this includes even the general, *existentiating* Mercy) becomes cut off. Creation itself would cease to exist, and in this way we find an interpretation for the *hadeeth*: "No, the Earth cannot remain [without an Imam]; otherwise, it would be destroyed."

Sheikh Ahmad and Unveiling (*Kashf*)

The degree to which someone can receive some kind of revelation or inspiration directly from God is at the heart of any mystical system which hopes for an individual relationship with God, and it is this idea of such unveiling (*kashf*) and its relationship to the Imam where Sheikh Ahmad unifies the idea of Imamate with the idea of an individual relationship with God. where Here we find Sheikh Ahmad borrowing most heavily from the prevailing

53: Cole, Ibid., p. 10.

influence of Suhrawardi over Shi'a theosophy. For here he explicitly uses the concept of *ishraq*, but puts a distinctly Shi'a spin on it: *ishraq* is ultimately the product of the Imams existence. It is the Imam's Light which is radiated throughout the world and enters into the hearts of those who are prepared for it. Here we see Imamology, the ontology of Light, and the philosophy of Illumination all overlapping into a single system. For the Imam *is*, ultimately, a being of light in his actual existence as *logos*, and he can never be reduced to a mere composition of low matter in the form of a physical person. But with the Imam becoming light, one becomes prohibited from accepting Suhrawardi's doctrine that the true sage who has received Illumination becomes the caliph of his time, becomes the *qutb* and the spiritual center of the world. For the Imam is not so much the being who receives illumination but is rather the means of it, something only intelligible with an understanding of the way that the Imam becomes identified with the Universal Intellect in *Al-Kafi*.

In spite of this enormously important difference, the role of Imamate, does bare certain similarities with the Christology of Christian gnosticism. The mission of Christ was to bring human beings back to that Divine home, to liberate them from the prison of material being. The goal of Christ was to bring *gnosis* which will allow people to find the Divine spark within them and let that spark become the center of their being. As such, gnosis is something which comes from within, and is not a matter of creating a meeting between the Divine and the human. Sheikh Ahmad conceives of Imamate, as the vehicle of Allah's special Mercy, being merely a matter of awakening, and that whatever knowledge one gains is something that comes from within. This belief returns to the concept of the primordial Covenant between the souls and Allah, where they were asked: "Am I not your Lord?" to which they responded "Yes!" The taking of this covenant forms the basis

for a kind of eternal knowledge which is present inside all beings. Guidance is a means through which people, after being given the existentiating Mercy at the moment of their creation, receive that special Mercy and then traverse the return-leg of the path they have already trodden. Teachers seek only to awaken the “past memory” of this covenant, the spiritual collective conscience of all people, and do not in any way bring some kind of new knowledge to people. As a result people will only accept that which subconsciously accords to their memory of that covenant, and will reject what is discordant with it.⁵⁴ The world of terrestrial life, then, is not a prison in the way that it is in Christian gnosticism. It is, rather, a place of forgetfulness, which thereby occasions the need for Prophets and Imams.

This pre-eternal knowledge is the fruit of “unveiling”, *kashf*. The main reformulation which Sheikh Ahsa’i offers for Islamic law and doctrine is the assertion of *kashf* (unveiling) as a canonical source of law. In the *usuli* school, the sources of law are considered to be four: Qur’an, *sunnah*, *‘aql*, and *ijma’* (consensus). In Sheikh Ahsa’i’s formulation, the Qur’an, *sunnah*, and *ijma’* all come under the rubric of *naql*. *‘Aql*, in the sense of reason, remains a canonical source, as will be discussed in the section below. But unique for Sheikh Ahmad is the elevation of mystical inspiration to a source of knowledge which a scholar may rest upon.

Kashf refers to the removal of veils which may exist over one’s soul, and prevent people from attaining spiritual knowledge. It is not something which can just come to anybody, in the sense that one might speak of a “poet” receiving inspiration. It is only open to the spiritual elite. Once such *kashf* occurs, then a person becomes open to *ilham*, spiritual inspiration. Once again, it must be asserted in this context that the knowledge which comes in such a context is not something purely external. It is something

54: Al-Ahsa’i, Ibid., p. 28.

that comes from within, and is ultimately a kind of self-knowledge. Sheikh Ahmad writes:

*Know, may Allah support you, that kashf means the removal of the veils which exist over the rational and holy soul, the soul which, once known, gives knowledge of one's Lord.*⁵⁵

The Sheikh then goes on to list eight levels of veils which exist over the soul. Once these eight veils are removed,

*...then you will know your Lord, and the Lord will manifest Himself to you inside your own heart, through His Glorious Light.*⁵⁶

The "internality" and primordial nature of this knowledge is, as is usually the case with Sheikh Ahmad, on a specific narration. He bases his discussion on the hadeeth of Imam Ali:

*Knowledge is not in the heavens, so that it would descend to you, and it is not in the Earth, so that it would rise to you. Rather, this knowledge formed inside your hearts.*⁵⁷



There is a real difference in emphasis here between Sheikh Ahmad's formulation of *kashf* and that of Haydar al-'Amuli and other Shi'a theosophists. For Al-'Amuli, *kashf* involves the lifting up of veils which block the servant's access to the Preserved Tablet, where revelation has been inscribed. But for Sheikh Ahmad, the *kashf* is more internal. It involves breaking down the barriers inside of an individual *person* which blind them to the Divinity within,

55: Al-Ahsa'i, Ibid. p. 27.

56: Al-Ahsa'i, Ibid., p. 28.

57: Qtd. in Al-Ahsa'i, Ibid.

which blinds them to their actual role as a place of Divine Manifestation (*mazhar*).

One can see how this doctrine is intimately related to the downward movement of existentiating, general Mercy which comes through the Imams, and the special Mercy, also mediated by the Imams, which brings believers into an awareness of the true state of things. For since the ultimate goal of the spiritual journey is a return to this primordial knowledge, it would make sense that the Imams (as eternal entities existing before the creation of all else) and *only* the Imams would play the most pivotal role in the guidance of believers. For the souls of the believers are formed *directly* from the light of the Imams, and returning to the state of knowledge and awareness they possessed in that time of luminous existence would require a return to their cosmic source in the “oceans of Light” formed by the Fourteen Infallibles.

The person who reaches this level of spiritual potency does *not*, in Sheikh Ahsa'i's formulation, in any way become *the* Imam. Rather, he has become open to a communication with the esoteric knowledge of which the Imam is the embodiment. The close identity between the interior faculty of *'aql* and the exterior position of Imam does not seem to be picked up by Sheikh Ahmad, who is very anxious to assert the exaltedness of the Imams over all other people. But even if one accepts the supreme position given to the person of the Imam, there is no doubt that Sheikh Ahmad uses the concept of the “light of the Imam” being present within the believer. The Imam himself is not present within the believer, as has been claimed by some mystics who believed that they had been infused with the spirit of the Imam.⁵⁸ This kind of hypostatic union of believer and Imam is entirely denied. Rather, Sheikh Ahmad's thesis is one of *ishraq*, illumination, which is closely in line with

58: See Arjomand's discussion of some of these individuals in *Shadow of God*, pp. **

the language of the *hadeeth*: For the light of the Imam is not the same as the Imam himself, just as the light of the sun is not the same as the sun of itself. Nonetheless, there is certainly a kind of inseparability between the light of an object and the object itself, and in this way the Imam can be seen as “present” to the believers during the *ghaybah*. He would most certainly not accept language such as coming into the Imamate or *mahdiyyah* of one’s being, not so much because he would reject the concept (which would seem to be acceptable in the light of his understanding of Imamate), but rather because it would contradict the exoteric understanding of Imamate which is confined to a single individual.

In this vein, Sheikh Ahmad and his followers are keen to assert that in absolutely no way can the *kashf* which is received by a believer be in any binding on another person. Sheikh Ahmad takes a very *usuli* position in this regard. On the one hand, *taqlid* in matters of doctrine (of which esoteric knowledge would be a part) is forbidden. All believers must make the greatest effort to come to their own conclusions about their belief system. However, *taqlid* is necessary (as will be discussed below) with regards to the laity. But in that case one may only make reference to a proper *mujtahid* who is able to give judgments on matters of Islamic law, judgments which must always be in accordance with the Qur’an and *sunnah*. If a *mujtahid* cannot provide proper evidence from the Qur’an and *sunnah*, but only something that he has understood through *kashf*, than one would not be allowed to do *taqlid* of him on that issue.⁵⁹ *Kashf* is only binding on the person who receives it.

On this basis, Sheikh Ahmad becomes extremely angry with the Sufis. While the clerical technocracy, who perceive only the

59: See Cole, Cole, Juan R. I. “Individualism and the Mystical Path in Shaikh Ahmad al-Ahsa’i.” *Occasional Papers in Shaykhi, Babi, and Baha’i Studies*. No. 4 (September 1997), pp. 9-10, and Al-Quraishi, Sheikh Sai’d. “Al-Sheikh Ahmad wa Nazhriat al-Mu’arifah,” p. 8.

exoteric side of religion, are certainly an object of (at least indirect) attack in Sheikh Ahmad's writings, he is quite open in his dismissal of the Sufi groups existing at his time. The obedience which Sufi masters require of their students is seen to be, on the one hand, an attempt to usurp the spiritual station of the Imams with regards to esoteric guidance and *ta'wil*. On the other hand, it involves people who are wholly unqualified as scholars assuming positions that a *mujtahid* should in matters of law. In the same treatise where he declares Ibn 'Arabi to be a disbeliever, he goes on to make a blanket assessment of all the Sufis, based upon a number of narrations of the Imams. Sufism is seen, by Sheikh Ahmad, to stand in eternal opposition to the teachings of the Imams. Some of the narrations he quotes are:

Imam as-Sadiq was asked: "A people have come in this time, and they call themselves Sufis. What do you think of them?" The Imam said: "Indeed, they are our enemies. Whoever inclines towards them, he is amongst them, and he will be destroyed alongside of them."

From the Prophet: "The Hour [of Judgment] will not come to my nation until a people emerge who call themselves Sufis. They are not from me, and, indeed, they are the Jews of my nation. They sit in circles for the remembrance of their leaders, and they raise their voices for the sake of such remembrance, believing that they are the people of good. But indeed, they are the most misguided of disbelievers, and they are the people the fire."⁶⁰

Such Sufis do not really receive any *kashf*, but are only following their own delusions. They are described elsewhere in this treatise as being the true followers of Shaitan. They engage in

60: Both qtd. in Al-Ahsa'i, Ibid., p. 189.

fanciful interpretation of the Qur'an, twisting it from its proper meaning. If any of their interpretations are to be accepted, says Shaikh Ahmad, then we would have to dispense with the whole of the Qur'an. For casting doubt on part of the exoteric meaning of the Qur'an necessitates casting doubt on the whole text, and as such the methodology of Ibn Arabi and other Sufis can only lead to misguidance.⁶¹

True *kashf* requires true knowledge of the exoteric sciences, something open to the *mujtahids* who are both well-versed in the law and pious in their own souls. Sheikh Ahmad and his followers are very clear to limit the scope of *kashf* even with regards to the one who receives it himself, and not just anything that comes as a kind of "inspiration" should be treated as a religious proof (*hujjat*). They are equally intent upon limiting the role of 'aql in their formulations of *ijtihad*. *Kashf* never takes the place of *naql* or overrides it, and if anything gained through *kashf* contradicts the clear meaning of the Qur'an and the *hadeeths*, then it is to be abandoned as the influence of the Devil or some other fancy. Four conditions are presented for the proper use of *kashf*:

That one is in possession of all their faculties. As such a small child whose body and mind are not properly matured cannot receive *kashf*. Nor can the person be foolish or otherwise mentally retarded.

"Cleanliness" from all spiritual impurity, resulting from the consumption of forbidden things such as pork and alcohol, or the perpetration of any other type of sin.

The absence of *taqlid* or prejudice. A person whose mind is not open is not able to receive *kashf*. He must be willing to accept what he receives, even if it is something he may dislike. He also must not be given to blindly following in others in matters of doctrine

61: Al-Ahsa'i, Ibid., p. 190.

(though Sheikh Ahsa'i, as will be discussed below, asserts the need for *taqlid* in areas of *fiqh* as do other *usuli* scholars). Here, we see the need for an individual attitude towards God that is not colored by any spiritual guide other than the Imam.

The ability to distinguish truth from falsehood. A novice may receive a kind of inspiration that is incorrect, and perceive it as right, or he may receive a kind of inspiration which is correct but decide that it is wrong. Here the critical point is made: Whatever comes to the gnostic through inspiration *must be compared to the Qur'an and the sunnah*. If what was revealed to him is in conflict with the explicit, clear meaning of the canonical sources, then he will know that he is wrong. If it accords with what he finds in the texts and only provides a deeper understanding that reveals the "true meaning," then he may accept it.⁶²

Rather than contradicting the idea of a pontifical Imamate, all of Sheikh Ahmad's thinking on this issue helps to buttress such a concept. For the words of the Prophet and the Imam are the only way that the intention and desires of Allah can be understood. There is absolutely no room for *afrad* who act independently of the cosmic Pole. The *naql* of the Ahl-al-Bayt, then, is of the most critical importance, and it is the pillar for the rest of his system. Even though Sheikh Ahmad shares a great deal with Ibn 'Arabi, he is staunchly critical of what he argues are Ibn 'Arabi's contradictions of the apparent meaning of the Qur'an and the *hadeeths*. One of the conditions by which "unveiling" can be judged as sound, as already mentioned, is that it does not contradict the apparent meaning of the canonical sources. This is something that Ibn 'Arabi is considered to be immensely guilty of by Sheikh Ahmad. For example, the doctrine that everything is, in reality, a manifestation of God, has led Ibn 'Arabi to argue that there was a certain correctness in the Children of Israel's worshipping of

62 Al-Quraishi, Ibid., p. 3.

the golden calf, and Pharaoh's claim to be the most high God, as such acts of polytheism were nonetheless acts of worship directed towards God. The difference is that polytheism is not legislated by Allah as a proper means of worshipping Him, and as such the polytheists will be punished.⁶³ Nonetheless, Ibn 'Arabi goes a step further, arguing that Pharaoh himself had a genuine belief in God, even though he was clouded from this belief by his love of worldly affairs.⁶⁴

Sheikh Ahmad was asked about this in another of his treatises. He responds with the most harsh criticism of Ibn 'Arabi, and seems to be very angry at the fact that the person asking him about Ibn 'Arabi referred to him by his title, *Muhyi ad-Deen* (the reviver of faith). He refers to Ibn 'Arabi, instead, as *Mumit ad-Deen* (the killer of faith), and even goes so far as to detail the reasons why such an appellation is appropriate in this context. His criticism of Ibn 'Arabi highlights his unshakeable belief in the magisterial nature of the Imamate:

Know that the life of religion is based upon the truth, because, in reality, it is the Water from which Allah made all living thing. And it is the truth that Pharaoh was a disbeliever, and those who were with him, and those who followed him. The narrations indicate that whoever denies the explicit meaning (*nass*) of the Qur'an is a disbeliever, and there is consensus (*ijma'*) on this issue as well. As such, since Ibn 'Arabi has said this, so he was of this class of people [the disbelievers], and he is the killer of faith (*mumit ad-deen*).⁶⁵

The importance of adhering to the strict words of the text is clear. Sheikh Ahmad always sees an underlying unity between the exterior and the interior, with each level existing on its own terms.

63:

64: Ibn 'Arabi. *Futuh al-Makkiyah*, vol. 3, p. 178.

65: Al-Ahsa'i, *Ibid.*, p. 187.

Understanding the interior meaning of a verse never necessitates denying that external meaning; rather, esotericism involves a deepening of a meaning which has already been established.

As a result, we see that in spite of his hefty writings on the esoteric nature of Imamate, this does not lead him to deny or even downplay the more traditional aspects of Imamate which are related to law. He fully accepts the link with Sharif al-Murtada makes between the concept of *taklif* and the need for an Imam who will preserve and make possible that *taklif*. His treatise on doctrine, *Hayat an-Nafs* [The Life of Souls], is scarcely distinguishable from any other traditional text of doctrine, such as those of Sheikh as-Saduq or even Allamah Muzzafar, a century later. With regards to *taklif*, he writes in *Hayat an-Nafs*:

Based on what has been narrated by both sects from the Prophet: "He who dies without knowing the Imam of his time dies the death of ignorance [polytheism]," we see that the meaning refers to these two sects, because it applies to what is happening in our own time. So whoever dies in our own time and does not know the Imam of his time dies the death of ignorance, and this idea is not correct unless the Imam is present, because he is a *lutf* [grace] so long as there is *taklif*, and so long as there is *taklif* it is not correct for the *lutf* to be absent. This is because the *lutf* is a condition of the *taklif*, and the *taklif* ceases once its condition is removed.⁶⁶

In this way, Sheikh Ahmad never seems to contradict the *'ulama* and *fuqaha* who have come before him. Unlike some of the *akhbaris* of his time, who made vicious attacks upon some of the most respected early scholars such as Sheikh at-Tusi, Sheikh Ahmad fully accepts their doctrines and ideas. He has only attempted to add a third component alongside the use of *naql* (accepted by all)

66: Al-Ahsa'i, Sheikh Ahmad. *Hayat an-Nafs*. Beirut: [publisher unknown], 1420. p. 57.

and the use of *'aql* (accepted by the *usuli*): the use of *kashf* and inspiration as described in the previous section. For this reason Corbin has dubbed the system of Sheikh Ahsa'i as "the theosophy of Shi'ism."⁶⁷ It is interesting to note the degree to which Sheikh Ahmad seeks to preserve the systems of thought and understanding which came before him.

Sheikh Ahmad's goal was to create a kind of third way, beyond the rigid thinking of the *akhbari* and the technocracy of the *usuli 'ulama*. Arjomand writes that Sheikh Ahmad was "the champion of Akhbari traditionalism,"⁶⁸ but this is not correct. Sheikh Ahmad was, undoubtedly, an *usuli* in terms of his *fiqh* methodology, and placed a great emphasis on the role of the *mujtahid*. In a debate with the *akhbari* scholar Al-'Asfur, he makes a vigorous attempt to defend the permissibility of speculative inquiry in matters of Islamic law.⁶⁹ *'Aql*, in the sense of reason is considered to be a full canonical source as well.

Like most *furuqa*, however, he is keen to assert the impossibility of *'aql* ever reaching legal conclusions on its own. As he argues in the case of *kashf*, *'aql* itself must also be in conformity with the apparent meaning of the Qur'an and *sunnah* as well as the common understanding of the Muslims. He writes:

The condition for correctness of a deduced statement is that it must be witnessed to [i.e., in conformity with] the Qur'an and *sunnah*, without any kind of interpretation.

The second condition is that it be in conformity with the clear meaning of the words used by the laity [in this regard] from the believing Muslims [the Shi'a], though not in accordance with their

67: Corbin, Henry. "Imamologie et Philosophie" in *Le Shi'isme Imamite*, p. 154.

68: Arjomand, *Shadow of God*, p. 252.

69: For a thorough discussion of the Sheikh's argument in this regard, see Cole, Juan R.I. "Shaikh Ahmad Ahsa'i and the Sources of Religious Authority" in Waldbridge, Linda. *The Most Learned of the Shi'a*, pp. 88-89.

interpretations, since as we have mentioned their understanding of such things is against the truth, even though the apparent meaning of their words is correct.⁷⁰

The Sheikh is speaking in somewhat elitist terms here, in line with both a clerical elitism (characteristic of the *usuli* school) and a mystical elitism. For the Sheikh, the common people do not understand at all the inner meanings of the Islamic mission. They do things that are apparently correct but, in fact, are grossly misunderstood. The Shaykhi scholar ‘Abd al-Mun’am al-‘Imran uses the following example: When most Muslims supplicate, they raise their hands up to the sky. This is a correct action. Nonetheless, if the laity were to be asked why they do such thing, they would respond that it is because Allah is in the sky, something which is grossly incorrect. As such the exoteric act is correct even though the internal understanding is wrong. To understand the true meaning of that act requires recourse to *naql* or *kashf*, and the author then goes on to quote a *hadeeth* of Imam Ali explaining the significance of the supplicatory gesture.⁷¹

Even in his mystical writings, we find a great deal of *fiqh* interspersed. In the treatise where he discusses the creation of the lights of the Prophet, he also embarks upon a discussion as to whether or not the urine and stool of the Ahl al-Bayt are ritually impure (*najis*). He presents a very *usuli* argument in this regard: insofar as the waste of the Ahl al-Bayt are classified as waste in language, and since all such waste is considered to be impure, one must thereby follow the apparent meaning of those verses of Qur’an and those *hadeeths* which deal with impurities and apply that classification to the waste products of the Ahl al-Bayt.⁷² Furthermore, he says,

70: Qtd. in Al-‘Imran, Sheikh ‘Abd al-Mun’am. “Munabi’at Ma’rifat ash-Sheikh,” p. 6.

71: Al-‘Imran, Sheikh ‘Abd al-Mun’am. “The Sources of the Sheikh’s Knowledge,” p. 7.

72: Al-Ahsa’i, *Rasa’il al-Hikmah*, p. 259.

there are many narrations which indicated that the Prophets and Imams would remove any impurities from their body as would be required by Islamic law. Nonetheless, he offers the possibility that since the impurity of waste is the result of sin and impurity in the soul, and that since the Ahl al-Bayt were sinless, it might be illogical to assume that their waste was impure. Those narrations which indicate that they would clean themselves according to the *shari'ah* would merely indicate that such an act was recommended on their part, as it would be inappropriate to pray, for example, with even ritually pure waste products on one's body.⁷³

The rigid adherence to the canonical sources required by Sheikh Ahsa'i is probably the reason why people such as Arjomand would consider him to be an *akhbhari*. But his traditionalism in this regard is never turned against the *usuli 'ulama*, of whom he considers himself to be a part (he held a certificate of permission in *ijtihad* from one of the most important *usuli* scholars of his time, Allamah Najafi). In reality he is a conservative *usuli*, who argues for extreme caution with regards to any deviations from the canonical sources, in contrast to the many deviations which were occurring in Iran. In many ways his own master, Allamah Najafi, made similar types of criticisms in his own works, especially with regards to issues like Friday prayer, and it was only in this way that Sheikh Ahmad departed from the mainstream Usuli community.

Following his assertion of the need for *ijtihad*, Sheikh Ahmad is also keen to assert the necessity of *taglid*. He wholeheartedly believes that the *fuqaha* as a body are the inheritors of the knowledge and authority of the Prophet, at least the exoteric body of knowledge, and that as such they are endowed with the same legal authority as the Prophet. He discusses this issue in a commentary on the *hadeeth* of the Prophet: "The '*ulama* of my nation (*umma*) are like the prophets of the Children of Israel," and the *hadeeth* that

73: Al-Ahsa'i, *Ibid.*, p. 260.

“The ‘*ulama* are the inheritors of the prophets.” In spite of the fact that the *hadeeth* at least partially refers to the Imams themselves,

It is permissible that the meaning of this narration may refer to the ‘*ulama* of the Shi’a, if their knowledge is derived from the Qur’an and the *sunnah*, and that they are knowledgeable about the knowledge of the Ahl al-Bayt. As such, the obligation to obey the ‘*ulama* is the same as the obligation of the Children of Israel upon their own Prophets, with regards to all those issues which pertain to the lawful and the prohibitive...The meaning of the ‘*ulama* being similar to the prophets of the Children of Israel, with regards to the obligation of obeying them, is that Allah, may He be glorified, has made them a medium in this regard.⁷⁴

Sheikh Ahmad makes it clear, however, that the authority of the ‘*ulama* is derived from the degree to which they cling to the narrations which come from the Ahl al-Bayt and to the Qur’an itself, in contrast to the formulations given for *wilayat-e-faqih* which completely negate such a need. The status of the ‘*ulama* is merely that of a medium between the teachings of the Ahl al-Bayt and the people, in times and situations when the common people (*al-‘uwam*) are unable to have a direct contact with the Imam.

The modern Sheikhi ‘*ulama* have, however, differed from their more mainstream *usuli* counterparts in one key area of *taqlid*: the obligation to follow “the most learned” of the Shi’a. Especially today, almost all *maraja’* have ruled that the laity must do *taqlid* of the scholar regarded as most knowledgeable in the jurisprudential sciences, especially *usul al-fiqh*. The current Sheikhi *marja’*, Ayatullah Mirza ‘Abd ar-Rasul al-Ihqaqy al-Ha’iri, discusses this issue in his collection of *fatwas*, *Ahkam ash-Shari’ah*. He first argues that distinguishing the most learned is something difficult, and that the *hadeeths* which he argues refer to *taqlid* make no reference to the “most knowledgeable” or any such concept.

74: Al-Ahsa’i, Ibid., p. 256

If there is a most knowledgeable scholar, then it is certainly best to refer to him, but it is no way an obligation.⁷⁵ But he then goes on to give a *fatwa* that could probably only be found in a Sheikhi book: that *taqlid* of the most ascetic, most pious, and most spiritually insightful scholar is always superior to following the most knowledgeable, especially in the current time which is filled with sin and corruption.⁷⁶ The technocratic elitism of the *usuli* school has always meant that technical skill outweighs piety; but in the Sheikhi school piety remains the more important consideration, because it is such piety that opens one to the truth of which the Imam is the bearer.

The cosmogenic relationship of the Imam to the believers is a special bond, and the fact that the Imams are ultimately the source of all existence does not mean that disbelievers share in this unique relationship. All of the narrations in *Al-Kafi* which speak of this issue make it clear that there were two substances from which beings were formed: one is that of the *'illiyyeen*, from which the Imams and their Shi'a are formed. The other is *sijjeen*, from which the enemies of the Ahl al-Bayt and the *shi'a* of these enemies were formed. This commentary comes in the form of a *tafsir* of the *surah al-Mustaffifeen*, where the two terms of *'illiyyeen* and *sijjeen* are employed:

“Indeed, Allah created us from above the *'illiyyeen*, and formed the hearts of our Shi'a from the same. He then created their bodies from another substance. As such, their hearts will seek us out, because their hearts were created from the same thing we were created from.” Then the Imam read this *ayat*: “Never, indeed the book of the good is in the *'illiyyeen*. And what is this *'illiyyeen*? It is a book inscribed, borne witness to by the ones who are near.” [The Imam continued]: “And our [the Ahl al-Bayt]’s enemies were

75: Al-Ihqaqy Al-Hairi, Mirza 'Abd ar-Rasul. *Ahkam as-Shari'ah*, pp. 75-76.

76: Al-Ihqaqy Al-Hairi, *Ibid.*, p. 76.

created from *sijeen*, and the hearts of their *shi'a* were created from the same. He then created their bodies from another substance. Then he read this *ayat*: "Never, indeed the book of the evil is in *sijeen*. And what is this *sijeen*? It is a book inscribed."⁷⁷

The disbelievers not would not receive *kashf*, because *kashf* is a Divine knowledge whose medium is always the Imam. Because the disbelievers are created from a different substance and their hearts are therefore turned away from the Imams, they would not be able to receive the illumination which travels through their path. Worse, since *kashf* brings to light a knowledge which is present within the heart, that would assume that the person who is seeking *kashf* was an actual believer in his pre-cosmic state. But those who die as disbelievers, in the Sheikh's formulation, were always disbelievers, whose hearts were closed to the inspiration that comes from the path of the Imams. To return a "sleeping" believer to his original state would involve awakening him to his primordial state of belief; but the disbeliever was never in such a state, and as such there is no original state of belief to return to.

Does this mean that Sheikh Ahmad believes in pre-destination? Not exactly. In another treatise he discusses the nature of the primordial covenant. Though all the souls responded in the affirmative when they were asked to assert the Lordship of Allah, Sheikh Ahsa'i argues that some of these souls were not sincere in their affirmation.

Their disbelief which is manifested in the real world is, therefore, a result of that initial insincerity. Cole describes that as a kind of "karma" as opposed to pre-destinationism, whereby the decisions made by a person in a "past life" define the way one's present life will be.⁷⁸ However, this does not really answer the question, for it is necessary that the covenant referred to in the Qur'an would

77: *Al-Kafi*, vol. 1, p. 390, *hadeeth* #4.

78: Cole, *Ibid.*, p. 10.

come after the creation of the souls themselves, and those souls were already ingrained with belief or disbelief.

The ability of a true believer to receive *kashf* leads to another major doctrinal reformulation in Sheikh Ahsa'i's thought: the so-called "fourth pillar," or the Perfect Shi'a, a formulation implicit in his works but not made a formally explicit doctrine until later thinkers. Traditionally, the body of doctrine inside Shi'a Islam is divided into five categories, each one of which it is necessary to believe in for a person to be considered a believer. These five *usul ad-deen* (bases of faith) are: Monotheism, Prophecy, Imamate, Justice (of Allah), and the Resurrection/Afterlife. Many Sheikhs have argued that these five principles can be reduced to three, since the doctrine of justice is really part of the oneness of Allah, and the doctrine of resurrection is merely a teaching of the Prophet, and so can be classified as part of prophethood. Alongside of these three pillars is added a fourth: the concept of the "perfect Shi'a" (*ash-shi'a al-kamil*). Such a person becomes a kind of mirror by which the teachings and will of the Hidden Imam becomes manifest. This type of scholar-gnostic is in full receipt of the Light of the Imam. Nonetheless, he does not become a Sufi master, and his esoteric visions do not become binding upon anybody else. But it is through this figure (or figures) that the "work" of the Imam continues. The opposite holds true as well: Without the light of the Imam, without the esoteric Imamate referred to in our previous discussion, then the world itself will be plunged into darkness and there can be no path towards salvation. The Sheikh was asked about the nature of the *ghaybah*, and how such a thing can be possible if one believes there must always be an infallible guide. He writes in his conclusion:

We have *mutawatir* narrations which state that even if he [the Imam] is hidden from the eyes, his Light will still be present in the hearts of the Shi'a. In a reliable narration it is narrated that

the Imam benefits the people in *ghaybah* in the way that the sun benefits the people even when it is hidden beneath clouds. For the day is present insofar as the light of the sun is present, and if the sun's light is gone, then there can (at least normally) be no day. As such one cannot do without Infallibility,⁷⁹ whether this be from the locus of this infallibility [the guide, the Imam] and the light which comes from it, as is the case with the "translator" [the Imam, as discussed above] or the sustainer, or whether it only be through the light, as is the case with the *'ulama* who derive their knowledge from him. If this Infallibility were gone completely, then there would be no path to success, for there would be no light at all, and "he whom Allah does not give light, shall never have light."⁸⁰

Conclusions

The school of Sheikh Ahmad has not received that much attention in recent years. In a period where many Iranian intellectuals are seeking to build a new, reformed understanding of Shi'ism that does not involve sheer obedience to a technically oriented *fuqaha*, the question of how to preserve the idea of Imamate which is central to Shi'ism has been largely side-lined. Sheikh Ahmad's teachings on this doctrine, as we have seen, provide the grounds for an individual relationship with the Imam as spiritual guide, one that is not confined to the period of the Imam's presence or absence. In the present debates which are raging amongst intellectuals and clergy in Iran, the reformist movement could find many of their aspirations already realized in the Sheikh Ahmad's Shi'a theosophy.

79: Here the Sheikh seems to be using the word "Infallibility" to refer to the reality of the Imam.

80: Al-Ahsa'i, *Ibid.*, pp. 203-204.